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HOW HEALTHY IS YOUR HEALTH FOOD?

By Samantha Carlson



"The FDA only approves **15%** of health claims."

With the nation on a health kick, anything that looks healthier suddenly becomes appealing at grocery stores. Every food distributor has a symbol for their "newly improved, healthier" choices, which makes it easy to assume these marketing schemes have the consumer's best interests in mind.

If you want something that is truly healthy, start looking on the back of the box for an actual list of what is in your food. Cereal companies claim their cereals provide a good source of calcium, despite only containing 2 percent calcium (less than what is found in a can of pinto beans.) Iowa State nutrition extensions specialist, Ruth Litchfield, has worked at ISU for the past 15 years and teaches classes, in addition to speaking about health and nutrition across the state.

"People don't realize that as far as health claims, the FDA only approves 15% [of the claims]," Litchfield said. "Everything else is done for marketing purposes."

Litchfield says marketing strategies can base claims even if their product is only

slightly improved. This can vary from "less fat" or "lower sodium" to any other criteria. While that may be the case, it does not necessarily qualify that particular product to join the "good for you" category.

Look for key information on the label. There is more to health food than the amount of calories in an item. Ever since elementary school, the food pyramid teaches healthy habits, grains at the bottom, sugar and fat content capping off the pyramid with smallest category. Key factors to look for on labels include checking sugar content, sodium content and high fructose corn syrup all of which provide little to no nutritional value and contribute to many chronic health problems facing the nation today.

Why all the hype about high fructose corn syrup? Like many nutrients, if not used in moderation it can contribute to severe health problems, including obesity or early on-set diabetes. But oddly enough, high fructose corn syrup is just as bad in excess as white sugar.

"It is metabolized similarly to tradition-

al cane sugar, and research suggests there is no difference between the two," Litchfield said.

Because it is cheaper than white sugar and is available in liquid form for easy transportation, high fructose corn syrup is used as an ingredient in many foods that are convenient and require little effort to prepare. Used to enhance flavors in food, high fructose corn syrup is not a problem in itself, but if it is present in the majority of meals, it can cause unwanted health issues.

"As a society, we'll have to make a decision on convenience or nutritional values," Litchfield said. This decision applies to sugar and artificial sweeteners – like high fructose corn syrup – or sodium, all found in high levels in processed foods. Pick your vices. Limit sugar, sodium and high fructose corn syrup intake, but find what foods work best for you. On days you can't live without the convenience, try to counter with foods that provide more nutrients. Do your best to find a balance. **E**